

Education Reforms: Declining Education Standards Cry for Immediate Redress

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B RITISH colonial system of education had left a legacy we have not yet been able to come out of even after long six decades. Experimenting over years has effected many changes worth the name. But an education system truly responsive to our needs and aspirations as an independent people has yet to be evolved. Seven 'Education Commissions' worked and delivered volumes of reports with important recommendations. Successive governments could do very little indeed toward shaping a time-befitting education system. In the meantime huge demand for education due to growth of population has led to a phenomenal growth of education sector, public and private initiatives taken together. But quality of education has been on the continuous decline, a fact that gives an alarming signal for nation's future. Academicians and social thinkers are highly concerned over it. It's more than time serious thinking were committed to the issue. Imperative is to single out loop-holes and plug them.

Loop-holes

Education system as a whole right from primary to tertiary level has to be looked into for desired reforms. It is often said primary education lays foundation of higher education. Barring some government-run primary schools and private initiatives, primary education is simply miserable not to speak of laying any foundation. In our childhood times we would often hear those who had no hope of doing anything in life took to homoeopathy as their calling. Likewise nowadays people say the same thing about primary school teachers. At primary level teachers are supposed to be role models in their manners, talking, dressing etc. Primary schools are the places for children's first exposure outside of home. Children are deeply influenced by teachers' behavior, and if they learn something good here that would last them throughout life-time. But here what the children experience today is miserable something about which, perhaps, the less said the better it is.

Again, there is a gulf of difference in respect of teaching standard and amenities among vastly diversified categories of schools, some of them elite English medium schools, some govt. run good schools, and in last category vast numbers of govt. and non-govt. primary schools. Leaving aside thousands of drop-outs, lakhs of high school entrants don't come up with desired level of learning. The existing high schools also fall in various categories like primary schools. So, wide divergence in quality of education imparted in schools is reflected in first public examination results that is SSC results of various schools-elite and ordinary, rural and urban. Some schools record more than 90% GPA-5 score and 100% pass while many

others have to be content with 5-10% GPA-5 score and barely 50-60% passing. Again, an overwhelming number of schools get marked as shockingly poor performers or even non-performers. What can better explain the inadequacy of education system in the secondary stage? Reasons for such a hopeless state of affairs are not far to seek. The schools are not standing on the same plane in terms of competent teachers and educational facilities. Hence there happens a world of differences in output.

Mushroom Growth

Numerous private colleges and universities have sprung up like mushrooms to share the ever growing loads of admission-seekers for higher education with the govt. colleges and universities. High profile institutions have so long admitted students on the basis of admission test results. Allegations often arose of secret malpractices in the guise of taking donations over admissions. This is what has been euphemistically called 'admission business'. Again, some colleges like Narsingdi College (reported recently) are running eye-wash education programs only to cheat students. This racket has to go after a thorough probe.

More to that, there are hundreds of 'coaching centers' in cities and towns allegedly run on unholy nexus with renowned institutions. Some of them attract admission-seekers on a prior guarantee of admission into desired institutions and prove bona-fide of their claim by issuing a list of scores of successful students in admission tests who received coaching with them. Spoils of coaching money are said to be shared by the rackets. Innovative enough, the govt. has ordered admission of students in higher secondary level on the basis of SSC results this year. No admission test will be required. It looks a good step at least on the face. Students get some respite after first ever certificate examination in life, guardians are spared of over anxiety and coaching costs, and lots of time and energy behind admission tests saved. At this some unease and discontent may have grown among vested quarters of 'admission traders'. Who cares that versus greater interest of students? If public examination results are not relied on, then what purpose will it serve? If it is valued, students will wage all out effort to achieve it.

Generally speaking, teachers are blamed not to be teaching duly inside classrooms. They have taken to private coaching in their residence, worse in the very school and college rooms. Being eulogized as nation's conscience, how could they bring themselves down to doing that? Teachers also have their causes in defense. Costs of living already beyond manageable limit, teachers like other service-holders are really hard pressed to go for

some extra bucks by off-class coaching. That's what makes a strong case for enhanced salary and other emoluments to teachers that will suffice it to help them with decent living. Unless proper classroom teaching is revived and teachers' overall welfare ensured, off-class coaching will continue. In this private coaching based system those who cannot afford are sure losers in race. It's a big national shame that teachers called man-making architects should be running after money neglecting their sacred duty. Of course, they are no angels to be above mundane needs of life. We must plead their legitimate interests. But who will stop the mushrooming of coaching centers and how, that remains a question.

Commodity

Public colleges and universities being far fewer than needed, private institutions have come up on stage doing a kind of roaring business in the name of education. Many universities better call 'coaching centers' are housed in one or two floors of a market complex. Only a countable few with better (far from ideal) campuses are pursuing academic programs to the benefit of students, while a large majority is making money in exchange of certificates awarded with little or no attention to students' learning. It's as if like 'pay the money, then take the commodity that is certificate-all education.' Some guardians seem content with a graduation or post-graduation degree irrespective of their wards' educational attainment. It relates to only those who are extraordinarily wealthy. This is no good sign for a nation that needs to build itself into a knowledge-based society to meet challenges of 21st century.

Many private universities are allegedly run with faculty of teachers few of whom are worthy of the teaching job. Recruiting teachers of lesser academic backgrounds gives them handsome margin between tuition fees realized and contractual remuneration paid to 'cheap faculty members'. Can underdogs do the genius's role? They don't even care to return the 'money's worth'. There has to be answerability somewhere down the line. Education is too sensitive and crucial a thing to be left at the altar of 'education traders' avarice. Good or bad all private universities have made education a costly, saleable commodity beyond reach of the poor but meritorious students. Who takes count of the talented that drop out for sheer lack of financing? Amidst all pervasive rot some private universities are standing way above the mark caring for the students under really competent faculty. They are trying to give something of comparable education whatever the costs they realize. They are like isolated islands we pride ourselves upon.

Bane of Politics

Public universities were sought to be education centers per excellence. They did serve well. In recent years they have been plagued with political bane. Most academic sessions are hampered by mindless politicking at the instance of political leaders. Serene educational environment is vitiated for extra-academic reasons. Dhaka University once called 'the Oxford of The East' ceases to be respected as before if only for political rivalries among student factions. Over a long term few scholars are heard to have been born, a contrast with its glorious past. Worst of all, the teachers also are split along the political divides. Political alignment has been a decisive factor in recruitment of teachers. Recent media flashing of two stamped agreements between a political party and two newly appointed teachers in a reputed public university has come as a rude shock. These highest seats of learning have degenerated into nasty sites of political demonstrations and killings. Collecting tolls from development works in campuses under political masks and turning campuses into hot bed of confrontation should be stopped. Keeping politically conscious for one and bedeviling academic ambience are two things, and must be distinguished. Students eager to do politics can very well do the same joining political parties outside campuses. Otherwise this sorry state is bound to tell upon standards of education as it has already.

Redress

Politics has ruined public universities while craze for business with education has driven most private universities to ruins. Inevitable result is persistent decline in standards of education. If the slide is not arrested, the nation's backbone will be weakened beyond recovery. Only a few steps, such as handsome salary packs to teachers at all echelons, introduction of uniform curriculums and quality coarse contents, recruitment of competent teachers, strengthening of all academia with facilities, monitoring and enforcing strict compliance with govt.-set conditions for all institutions, maintaining peaceful academic condition, installing modern and identical examinations etc will set our wayward education system on track again. All this means a herculean task that needs huge investment, planning and execution with a long term vision. What's more important is a firm national will and unswerving commitment to salvage our education system. If we don't move forward, we can only go backward. Sliding educational standards can ensure only the latter. And that's the last thing we can want as a self-respecting nation. (The writer is a Deputy Secretary to the Government)